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ABSTRACT

Few of the English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) participants in adult education classes move on to academic ESL programs that prepare them for content area study or general educational development (GED) or high school equivalency instruction. The ESL literacy curriculum is currently mismatched with GED and academic ESL curricula in purpose, content, and context. Adult ESL and transitional programs can help students bridge this gap by providing them with: (1) motivation and belief in self-worth to face the challenges of academic and administrative demands; (2) knowledge of how to transition to the norms of the academic community; (3) conceptual development and critical thinking skills such as synthesis, analysis, and evaluation; (4) greater focus on language accuracy and careful language use; (5) extensiveness in reading and writing, and multiple skill integration thematically organized for in-depth study; (6) development of a larger vocabulary corpus centered on less-frequently-used academic terminology; and (7) integration and transfer of first-language (L1) skills and use of L1 in learning strategies. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

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Transitioning Adult ESL Learners to Academic Programs

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Adults study English as a second language (ESL) in a variety of settings (e.g., church basements, workplaces, public schools, community centers) for a variety of purposes (e.g., to improve employability, to survive in society, to help with children's education). However, few of the ESL participants in adult education classes transition, or move on, to academic ESL programs which prepare them for content study in a subject area, or to general education development (GED) study which provides them with a certificate of high school equivalency.

This digest examines the differences between academic and adult ESL programs, and it suggests curricular and programmatic strategies to facilitate transitioning learners from adult ESL to academic English or to GED programs.

The Curricular Mismatch

Between the adult ESL literacy curriculum and the GED and academic ESL curricula, there are differences in *purpose*, *content*, and *contextuality*.

- *Purpose*: The goal of federally-funded adult ESL instruction is to provide learners with the language skills necessary to function in American society, and to attain and retain a job (Young, Fitzgerald, & Morgan, 1994). In contrast, the goal of academic ESL instruction is to prepare adults of limited English proficiency with the grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing skills necessary to succeed in remedial or developmental courses and mainstream academic coursework (Wrigley, 1994a).
- *Content*: In adult ESL programs, the focus is on oral/aural communication and on reading comprehension and writing. The vocabulary and content center around personal expression and on survival needs in the home, workplace, and community (Crandall & Peyton, 1993). Conversely, in academic programs, the focus is somewhat less personal. Students usually learn language through an examination of grammar, less frequently used vocabulary, and longer readings. The content is frequently a precursor to upcoming subject study (Chamot & O'Malley, 1987).
- *Contextuality*: Much of the content and practice in ESL literacy instruction centers around issues within the context of adult life, such as making a doctor's appointment or looking for a job (Crandall & Peyton, 1993). In academic English classes, language study is either context-reduced (where there are few clues to help derive meaning) or context-embedded (where clues to meaning are available from the surrounding text material) (Snow, Met, & Genesee, 1989).

Transitional Program Outcomes for Learners

Given the chasm in purpose, content, and contextuality between adult ESL and academic ESL instruction, what learner outcomes can adult ESL or transitional programs facilitate to enable learners to bridge the gap to academic or GED programs?

(1) Motivation and belief in self-worth to face the challenges of academic demands and administrative systems

Adult learners moving on to academic ESL might face for the first time in their language study certain inflexible standards—such as passing GED exams or course tests—that must be met to achieve success. Learners may also experience an absence of the consistent positive feedback they have probably found in the adult ESL classroom. For learners to be successful in continuing education, they need to believe that advancement is possible through their *own* efforts (Rance-Roney, 1994).

To promote this necessary self-confidence in learners, programs need to challenge them with difficult but attainable tasks. For example, learners who want information about academic classes must do all the necessary research themselves to get this information (e.g., call the college dean, find how to get to the campus by car or by public transportation, practice the interview, do the interview).

(2) Knowledge of how to transition to the norms of the academic community

Formal collaborations among adult ESL service providers and institutions of higher learning are key to addressing this outcome. Collaborations can assure linking of curricula among the programs, orientation for transitioning learners, and transitional classes to bridge the gap between the programs (Wrigley, 1994a). Programs can create mentor partnerships in which ESL learners shadow learners who are already in GED or college classes. Other activities to familiarize learners with their future academic environment include interviewing academic staff and native English-speaking college students, reading college orientation guides, and taking notes from videotaped class lectures.

(3) Conceptual development/critical thinking skills such as synthesis, analysis, and evaluation

Wrigley (1994b) found little evidence of a metacognitive or learning-how-to-learn focus in the exemplary programs surveyed in a federally-funded study known as the Aguirre study. Yet, conceptual development exercises need to be part of the curriculum at every level, and some academic skills can be part of all adult language learning. For example, with a short reading selection, even low-level learners can *classify* vocabulary words (e.g., list all descriptive words or all action words) and can *analyze* actions of the main characters.

(4) A greater focus on language accuracy or careful language

Adult learners recognize that the language of the mainstream culture is rule-based and that knowledge of these rules is necessary for success in the academic world. While many adult learners acquire much English through immersion in the English-speaking culture surrounding them and through classroom opportunities for

discussion, many educators now agree that immersion alone is not sufficient to perfect language and that appropriate correction and feedback have a legitimate role in the ESL classroom (Hadley, 1993).

(5) Extensiveness in reading and writing, and multiple skill integration thematically organized for in-depth study

Adult learners may begin ESL literacy study with grammar or phonics instruction, but it is recommended that this isolated skill approach be integrated with instruction organized around themes of personal interest such as childcare, transportation, and immigration (Auerbach, 1992). These themes give meaning to language being learned and lead to richer and more extensive language use. Later, when academic goals become evident, content needs to be less relevant to learners' personal interests and more tied to community, national, and international themes (Chamot & O'Malley, 1987). This broader scope is necessary for the comprehension of academic content material in the sciences and humanities.

Reading is arguably the most important skill for second language learners in academic contexts. While pre-academic classes may require 5 or 6 pages of reading, academic courses frequently require 30 to 50 pages of reading per night. In transitional programs, learners need to read whole text material (novels, textbook chapters, autobiographies, etc.) and make extensive written responses to the material.

Writing instruction in the ESL adult classroom and in the academic classroom differ not only in the expectation of correct grammar, but also in the knowledge writers must possess of American English rhetorical organization, written sentence structure, punctuation, and cohesion words. Learners, even in adult ESL programs, need to learn a style of writing that may differ markedly from that of their first language. Furthermore, in adult ESL classes, writing is often based on personal experience, but academic writing tasks are more often based on articles, books, or topics unrelated to the learners' lives. All of these elements must be addressed in the transitional classes.

6) Development of a larger vocabulary corpus centered on less-frequently used academic terminology

While fluent native readers possess a written English vocabulary of 10,000-100,000 words, second language learners generally have only 2,000-7,000 English words when they begin their academic studies (Hadley, 1993). This gap can impede success in listening to lectures, reading academic material, or writing essays.

Many educators and researchers believe that extensive reading is the best way to build one's vocabulary. When learners are exposed to words in meaningful contexts, they are more likely to learn the words than if they are exposed to them in isolation; therefore, learners should be urged to read news magazines, newspapers, and whole text material to foster this vocabulary development. Krashen (1986) advocates narrow reading—the reading of several articles on the *same* topic—so that learners receive multiple exposure to new vocabulary in slightly differing contexts. In providing multiple texts to use in analyzing, evaluating, and comparing and contrasting authors' points of view, narrow reading also serves to build learners' critical thinking skills.

7) Integration/transference of first language skills and use of L1 in learning strategies

The acquisition of literacy skills in a second language (L2) by adults already literate in their first language (L1) is a complex phenomenon. However, there is evidence of transfer of reading and writing skills from L1 to L2 (Carson, Carrell, Silberstein, Kroll, & Kuehn, 1990; Osburne & Harss-Covaleski, 1992). More research is needed on this, however, and on the value of using L1 to help complete difficult tasks in the academic environment (Osburne & Harss-Covaleski, 1992).

Some educators advocate allowing learners to judge for themselves which tasks are better performed in L1 and which ones can only be completed in L2. For example, learners might choose to use L1 when generating ideas for a writing assignment. When listening to lectures where the speed, density, and familiarity of the material exceeds the skill of English language note-taking, learners might find it useful to take notes in L1 or to code switch, writing key words in English and explanatory information in L1. When reading, translation of terms or L1 reflective margin notes may promote learning of concepts and new vocabulary.

Conclusion

Transitioning learners from adult ESL to academic and GED programs requires a broad range of approaches and skills. Administrators, teachers, and learners need to work together to create programs that prepare learners to achieve all they can academically. Research is needed on how content learned in L1 can transfer to L2, and on the value of using L1 to help complete academic work in L2.

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